



A TRIP TO HEAVEN

Leelawati Bhagwat





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A TRIP TO HEAVEN AND OTHER STORIES

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A TRIP TO HEAVEN

Shankar was the King's Chief Gardener. He had to work from dawn to dusk as the royal gardens stretched for miles and were an expanse of multicoloured flower-beds, lush green lawns and clumps of majestic trees. His work consisted of sweeping the fallen leaves, watering the flowers, attending to young plants and saplings, rooting out weeds, raking the soil, manuring the ground and trimming the bushes. His cottage was in a corner of the garden from where he could always keep an eye on things.

One night, Shankar could not sleep. He tossed and turned till midnight. Then, he sat up and casually looked out of the window. He could not believe his eyes! Surely his eyes were deceiving him! He looked again. In the silvery moonlight, a huge white elephant was quietly nibbling fresh green grass.

Shankar was completely perplexed. Where could the elephant have come from? Besides, it was white, and Shankar had never seen a white elephant before. Suddenly a thought struck him. He remembered that when he was a boy, his mother had often told him stories of gods who dwelt



in heaven. Indra was their King and **he** rode Airavata, a beautiful elephant whose skin was as white as snow.

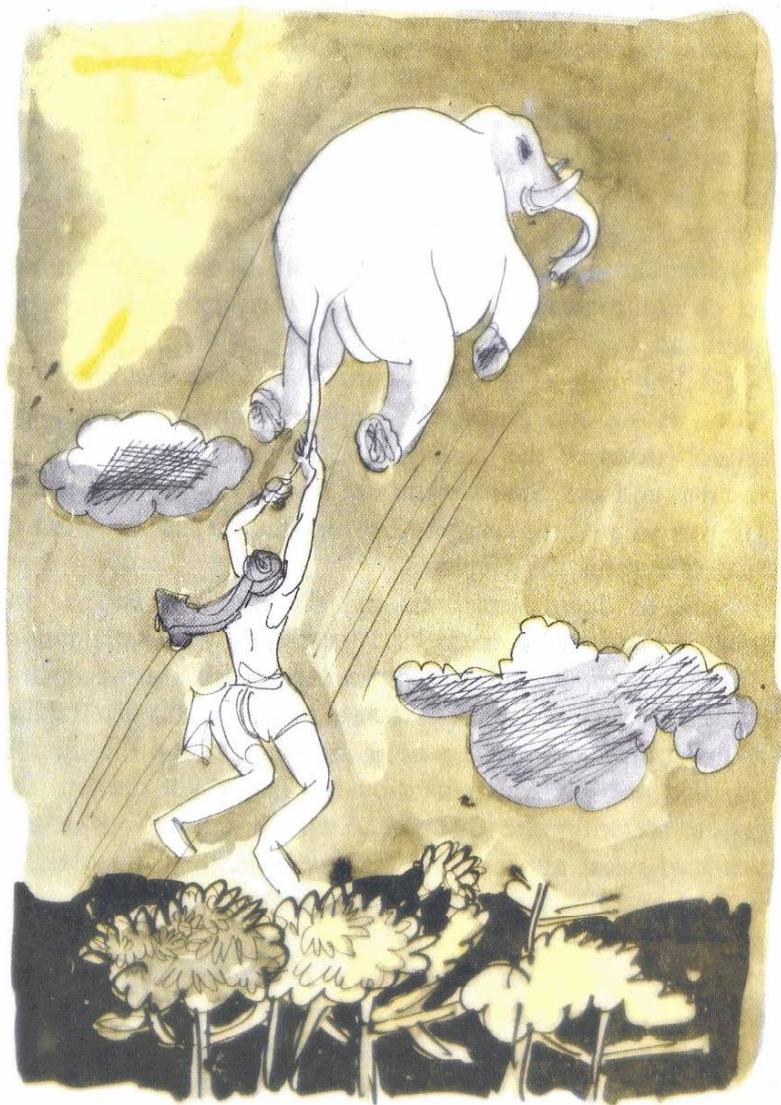
"Surely this is Airavata!" Shankar exclaimed excitedly. "Tired of **the delicacies** in heaven, he must have flown down to earth for a change. If **I** can hold on to his tail, he will take me back with him and I shall **see** all the wonders of heaven."

Shankar jumped out of bed, tiptoed out of the **house** so as not to wake his wife, and ran quietly towards the elephant.

Hiding behind a tree, Shankar watched the elephant. After **eating** the grass, the elephant turned towards the tender leaves of the saplings and the half-ripened fruit on the **mango** trees. Shankar did not utter a murmur of protest. He was so anxious to go to heaven that he did not want to risk offending the elephant.

Just as dawn was breaking, the elephant finished his meal. He raised his trunk and trumpeted with satisfaction. Shankar knew it was time for him to depart. He ran up and caught the elephant's tail. Airavata rose from the ground like a helicopter. Soon he was flying high above the clouds. Shankar looked down cautiously. The royal garden **was** just a speck in the **distance**. Shankar turned white and beads of sweat **appeared** on his **Face**. Just then, they landed in heaven. Shankar released **Airavata's** tail and **looked** around him.

His eyes **filled with** wonder. "This must be paradise—the **garden of** heaven!" **he exclaimed** delightedly. "Look how big and **beautiful** the **trees** are! I **wonder what kind of**



manure Indra's gardener uses?" Shankar wandered around marvelling at everything. The trees were ten times larger than those on earth, the leaves ten times as lush, the fruit ten times as tasty, and the flowers ten times as colourful. Shankar spent the day touching the leaves, feasting his eyes on the flowers, and tasting the juicy, delicious fruits around him.

At dusk, he suddenly remembered that his wife must be worried about him. "I will take ~~her~~ something—a ~~present~~ from heaven," he decided.

He chose a *betel-nut* which was as large as a coconut, and a *pan* leaf as big as a banana leaf. As soon as night fell, the elephant trumpeted. It was time to return to earth. **Shankar** ran and grasped his tail. In a few minutes he was back in the royal *gardens*. He rushed home to his wife who had been waiting anxiously for him.

"Where have you ~~been~~ all this time?" she asked angrily.

"Don't be angry," replied **Shankar** placatingly. "Just see what I have brought for you! And he showed her the betel-nut and *pan*.

Lakshmi was utterly amazed. "Where did you get such giant-size things?" she demanded excitedly.

"From heaven, of course," Shankar replied and told her the whole story. At first she would not believe him but right before her eyes wane the enormous betel-nut and *pan*. She was ultimately convinced. Then **Shankar** warned, "You must keep this a secret. This marvellous nut will last us a week. But remember not to disclose our secret to anyone."

Lakshmi readily promised but found it very difficult to

keep her word. She **was** a woman who liked to talk. When **Shankar** made another trip to heaven and returned with an **enormous fruit** which was **very** juicy, **she** became even more eager to tell **her** friends of her luck. But she resisted the **temptation**. Then her husband went to heaven a **third** time and brought back a gigantic flower whose fragrance pervaded the entire cottage.

One of **her** friends said, "What wonderful **scent** you are using. Where did you get it from?"

"I am not using any **scent**," replied **Lakshmi**. "That's the **fragrance of the giant flower** in my **house**."

Her friend **questioned her further** and she had to tell her the whole story. **Lakshmi** **made** her friend promise not to tell anyone else her secret.

The friend promised, but being a gossip could not keep the secret to herself. So she told it to **her** closest friend after **making** her promise not to tell it to anyone else. Her closest friend readily **promised**. Nevertheless, she too told the **secret** to **her** friend after **extracting** the same promise. And so it continued till soon all the **women** of the town knew the **secret**. And they **told** **their** **husbands**. So the whole town came to know **Shankar's secret**.

One morning, all **the** town's **men** and **women** **flocked** to **Shankar's** **cottage**. They insisted on **going** with **Shankar** on his **next** **trip to heaven**.

Shankar was furious at his wife's folly. But what could **he** do? So he reluctantly **agreed**. "Tonight all can gather in the **royal gardens**. But everyone must stand absolutely still."

That night, the royal gardens presented a strange sight. There were more men and women than there were trees but while the trees swayed with the wind, the human beings were as still as if they had been carved in marble. Even when Airavata appeared, no one stirred or uttered a sound.

At dawn, Shankar beckoned silently. Then he rushed up and grasped the elephant's tail. Lakshmi held on to her husband's feet. Her friend held Lakshmi's feet, the friend's husband held his wife's feet, another man held his feet and that man's wife held her husband's feet and so on. When the white elephant rose up, a long chain of men and women followed him on his journey to heaven, each one clinging desperately to the other.

During the voyage, the last woman in the chain could no longer contain her curiosity.

"Lakshmi told us that the fruit and flowers from heaven were very, very big," she said to her husband. "But she did not specify exactly how large. Will you please ask your friend above you?"

So her husband asked the man above him. The man asked his wife who asked the woman above her. The woman asked her husband who asked the man above him and so forth. Ultimately Lakshmi was asked the question and she said to her husband, "They want to know exactly how big the fruit and flowers in heaven are."

"You will see for yourself when we reach heaven," replied Shankar curtly.

But the woman who was holding Lakshmi's feet was so impatient that she kept repeating her question. So

Lakshmi implored her **husband**, "My friend refuses to wait. You must tell her immediately how large the fruit 'and flowers in heaven **are**.'

Shankar was so upset at this foolish impatience that he **said** angrily, "**Each fruit** is ten times as big as a fruit on **earth**. You know that **the betel-nut was that big...**"

In attempting to **demonstrate** the **exact** size with his hands, Shankar released the elephant's tail and ...

The entire chain from Shankar, whose feet **were** held by Lakshmi, **whose** feet were held by her friend: **whose** feet **were held by her husband**, whose feet were **held** by his **friend**, till the last person, came tumbling down to earth.

Then no one was alive to ask any questions.



A GRACIOUS GIFT

Once there was a king who was generous and kind. **He** was interested in the welfare of all his subjects and it **was** his greatest wish that all should live in peace and happiness and none should have any cause to grumble. So he wandered about the country incognito to learn the true condition of his people.

One day, when he was in disguise, he saw a strange sight. **A** farmer was vigorously ploughing his field but instead of a pair of oxen, he had yoked a woman to the plough. The **King's** blood boiled. He could barely control his anger.

"What are you doing?" he demanded sharply. "Haven't you any oxen? Why are you making this woman draw your plough?"

"**She** is my wife," quietly replied the farmer.

"Your wife!" screamed the King. "What do you **suppose** a wife is—a **slave** or a **beast** of burden?"

The farmer replied, "You **can** afford to **talk like that**. You rich **people** with your **horses and carriages** do not **know** what poverty **entails**. I **have become** so poor that

I had to sell my **oxen** to make ends **meet**. But a farmer must till his **land** to earn his living. So I have asked my wife to do the job of a **bullock**. She is not complaining."

This answer did not satisfy the King. He said firmly, "I will not tolerate this. Whatever you may say, it is most inhuman to use a woman in this **way**. I will give you enough **money** to buy a **bullock**, but you must immediately release the lady."

It was now the farmer's turn to be angry. "Who are you to order me about?" he asked curtly. "Why should I accept your money? I am not a beggar!"

The King then spoke gently, "Please unyoke my **sister**."

The **farmer** laughed derisively. "If you feel so sorry for your so-called **sister**, why don't you take her place? If you are willing to do that, I shall immediately release the lady!"

The King at once agreed. The farmer had no alternative but to unyoke his **wife** and yoke the King to the plough. The King started to draw the plough through the **field**, but he was not used to manual **labour** and so part of the land was badly ploughed. When the crop ripened, the **farmer** found that this part of the field yielded poor and small ears of corn.

The farmer turned to his wife angrily. "See what your so-called brother did. He did not work with all his strength. The result is that the ears of corn are underdeveloped."

But when they cut the harvest, they found that the small cobs contained pearls instead of seed.

"You were hasty and impudent to curse my brother.



Look at the rich crop he has given us--a **crop** of pearls!" the **farmer's wife** exclaimed with delight.

Her husband was full of remorse. "Your brother has performed **magic**. He must **have** supernatural **powers**. But I don't **think** we can **claim** these pearls. **They** belong to **the** man who created them. We must return them to their **rightful owner**."

"How can you do that? You never even asked him his name," his wife replied.

"We cannot keep the pearls. They are not ours. I must take them to the King," the farmer said firmly.

So tying the pearls in a bundle, they left for the King's palace. On arrival they went straight to the royal court. Here the King sat on the throne with his ministers and noblemen on either side.

The farmer and his wife approached the throne with the bundle of pearls and bowed respectfully.

Then raising their **heads** they said together, "Your Majesty, we..."

They did not complete **the** sentence. They stood speechless. The King was none other than **the** stranger who had insisted on replacing the fanner's **wife** and ploughing the field **himself!**

The farmer stammered, "The King! I made the King toil like an ordinary ox! He will never forgive me!"

Then he fell on his **knees** and **kissed** the King's feet again and again. "Your Majesty, please forgive me," he **beseeched**. "I made a grave mistake. Please forgive me."

The King too had **recognised** the couple. He smiled gently, "Why do you ask for forgiveness? You **gave** me an opportunity to see the problems that besiege my subjects. I am glad I was able to help you."

The farmer placed the bundle **of** pearls at the King's feet and said, "These pearls **were** reaped from **that** portion of the field which you had ploughed. **They do not** belong to us. **Please accept** them as the fruit of your **labour.**"

The King refused. "These pearls grew in your field



because of your hard work and your constant vigilance of your crops," he said.

But the farmer was still reluctant to accept the pearls. "These pearls are the fruit of your love ~~and~~ sympathy. They could not be a product of my cruelty," he insisted.

The King then picked up the bundle of pearls and went up to the farmer's wife. "I have called you my sister. I should give you a *bhai-duj* present. Will you please accept this little gift?"

Neither the farmer nor his wife could now refuse the gift. And so the dispute was settled amicably.



THE FAR-SIGHTED MERCHANT

Once upon a time, there lived in Varanasi two merchants, Mohan and Sohan. Mohan was wise and shrewd. He **utilised** every opportunity that **came** his way to best advantage and thus amassed a huge fortune. **Sohan**, on the **other hand**, was a wiseacre. He thought himself wise but in reality was a fool.

One day Mohan decided to go on a trading mission. He bought a variety of **valuable** articles and loaded **them** on **five hundred** bullock-carts. When **Sohan** **heard** of Mohan's plans, he said to **himself**, "I will also trade **with** other cities. I will beat Mohan at his own game."

Sohan had no money but bought the same goods as Mohan on loan, and loaded them on five hundred bullock-carts which he had borrowed.

When Mohan heard of Sohan's preparations he was very **worried**. **He** went to Sohan and **said**, "If we are to travel on the same road, we must go separately. The road is not strong enough to bear the burden of a thousand carts. Besides, it will be hard on the villagers on **whom** we shall have **to** depend for **food and** shelter. We must **therefore** go

separately. You must decide, would you like to go first or follow later?"

Sohan was overjoyed. He said to himself, "I will certainly go first. The road will be smooth, my bullocks will get the first fresh grass, my men get the best food and hospitality, and when I reach the cities, I shall be the first in the market to offer my goods."

The same thought occurred to Mohan but, *after weigh-*



ing the facts in his mind, he reached a **different** conclusion. So when Sohan stated his desire to leave first, **Mohan** agreed without hesitation.

Sohan left with his **caravan** of five hundred **carts**. He sang **gaily** and day-dreamed of the **riches** he would soon acquire. But he was soon **roused** from his **reverie**. The road was in a **bad condition** with many **stones** and **pot-holes**. The stones had to be cleared away and the **pot-holes** filled before



the carts could proceed. The villagers helped but they had to be paid and fed in return. This was expensive, and the repairs took a long time.

Then Sohan gave the order to move. The caravan rattled along the newly repaired road. Soon afterwards they entered a dense jungle. The men then had to cut down the trees to make way for the carts. The jungle was full of wild animals—tigers, lions, panthers and wolves. When it was dark and everyone slept, exhausted by the day's work, the animals attacked and killed many of the bullocks.

Sohan and his men were now tired and dispirited. Just when they were arguing about returning home or continuing on their journey, Sohan saw a cart coming down the road ahead of them. It was a big cart, drawn by white oxen and with half a dozen men in it. Their clothes were dripping wet, and they wore garlands of white lotuses round their necks.

Sohan greeted them and asked politely, "Can you tell us about the land through which you have just passed? Is there enough food and water there?"

"Of course," they all chorused. "Look at our clothes. See how wet they are! And look at the wheels of the cart. See how muddy they are! There has been heavy rain in the land and the lush fields present a picture of plentiful harvest."

Seeing the caravan laden with earthen pots of water, the strangers roared with laughter. "Why are you carrying all that water?" they asked. "It is a heavy load for your bullocks and quite unnecessary. You should throw away all the water, food and fodder."

So all the water, **food** and **fodder** were disposed of. Relieved of their burden, the bullock-carts rolled on merrily for some time. Sohan looked eagerly for the land of green pastures. But the countryside became drier and drier, and the soil parched and arid. Then the caravan entered a sandy desert.

Starved and parched with thirst, many of the men and animals died. The others, enervated and barely able to move, dragged themselves along. Then the strangers, a gang of thugs, descended on them. They stole the remaining bullocks and killed the men. Sohan and a few friends just managed to escape with their lives.

Weak and exhausted, Sohan and his friends reached the town where they **sold** the few goods they had **been able** to **salvage**. **But** they did not know the local prices and **seeing** their miserable condition, the traders paid them **poorly**. **Sohan** returned home a broken, disappointed man.

Then **Mohan** left with his caravan. The road was smooth due to **Sohan** and his men's hard work. There was a clear path through the **jungle**, and the wild animals had been frightened away.

Then **they** came across the gang of thugs **who** urged them to throw away all the food and **water** as the land ahead was **rich** and **prosperous**. But **Mohan** was **wise**. He said to his men, 'I do not **believe them**. The land ahead looks dry. These **men** are wearing wet **clothes** and garlands of lotuses but **there are** no signs of rain. The sky is **clear** and **cloudless**. These **men** are just **deceiving** us for some purpose of **their own**."





pleasure. "Take this money and give me the rat."

Hari took the **coin** and went to a shop. Here he bought **some sweets**. Taking the **packet of sweets** and a jar of **water**, he ~~went~~ to the outskirts of the town. There at the entrance of a beautiful garden was a **big banyan tree**. Hari put the jar of water and the packet of **sweets** on the ground and sat **down** in the shade of the tree and waited.

An hour later, a gardener came out of the garden. He was tired and hungry after the day's work. Hari offered him the **sweets** and a glass of **water**. The old man **was** so grateful that he gave Hari a **big bunch of flowers** in return.

Hari **sold the flowers** and bought more sweets. He went back to the entrance of the garden and waited in the shade of the tree. This time he gave the **sweets to all the gardeners**.

THE PRASAD

In a small village in South India lived a poor farmer. He had two children, Uma, an eight-year-old girl, and **Gopal**, a baby boy. When his wife died, his daughter Uma took over the **responsibility** of looking after **her** brother. A few years later the farmer also died, and the two children became orphans.

Uma was very mature for her age. She **knew that** she would have to be both father and mother to **Gopal**. She also had to make ends meet. She had to plough the field, manure and water the land, sow seeds and ultimately harvest the crop. The neighbours, who admired her **courage**, helped **her**, and she had a good harvest and was able to support **her brother** and herself.

The years went by and **Gopal** finished his studies. Then one day he said to his sister, "You **have** spent the **better part of** your youth **looking after and** providing for me. By now you should **have been married** and you **should have had** a family **of your own**. **But the marriage of a girl requires a lot of money and I have none.** Neither can I provide you with an adequate **dowry**."

But Uma did not worry. One day, one of the young village men, who had always loved Uma, called on **Gopal**. **As was customary**, he **asked Gopal** for his sister's hand in marriage. He said that he was not **interested** in a dowry and valued Uma for **her unselfishness and undaunted courage**.

So the **wedding date** was **fixed** and soon afterwards **Uma** was married. Before leaving for **her** new home she **said** to **Gopal**, "Soon you will **get** married too. You must **continue** our custom of performing **Lakshmi Puja** on the first Friday of **Shravana**. You must promise that you will **make your** wife keep up this tradition." Without hesitation **Gopal** promised to honour this small request of **his** sister.

Years passed. **Gopal** worked hard and his fields yielded abundant harvest. He married Kamala, the pretty, spoilt daughter of a wealthy farmer.

A few weeks **later** was the holy month of **Shravana**. The whole village began making preparations to celebrate **Lakshmi Puja**, particularly those homes where there were newly married women. For on this occasion, women are specially invited to participate and the **place** of honour is given to married daughters and sisters who are considered very esteemed and respected guests. It is **believed** that if the girl Messes the house., then it will have happiness and prosperity but her curse **can bring doom**. **Gopal remembered** his **promise** and **told** his wife about it. Kamala agreed to **celebrate Lakshmi Puja** lavishly. But on one condition. "You must not **invite** your sister," Kamala implored. "She is poor **and** will arrive in rags with her brood of children all looking scruffy. She will shame us, and my family will

laugh at me if they know that you have such penniless relatives."

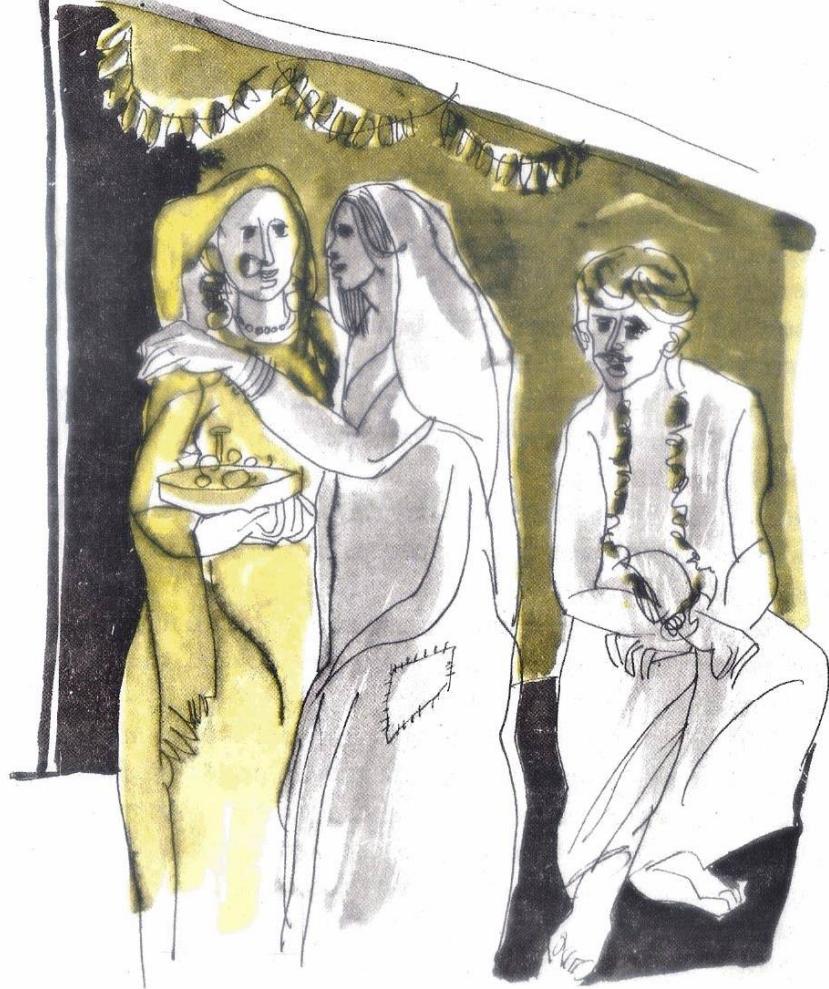
Gopal agreed. He did not want to upset his rich, pretty wife. He did not invite Uma.

It was the first Friday of *Shravana*. Gopal's house was filled with people. The mingled fragrance of flowers and incense hung over the house. From the kitchen wafted an aroma of spices. Special cooks had been engaged to prepare a variety of delicacies. As the guests poured in, they were welcomed with garlands of **flowers**, rose-water was sprinkled on them, and they were offered *tambul* and coconuts.

At the height of the festivities **Uma** appeared. **Kamala's** pretty face turned **pale**. **There** was a big silver bowl which Kamala **was** carrying containing the *prasad*. She **was** going **around** the room giving *prasad* to the guests. Uma came up and hugged Kamala. Then, helping herself to the *prasad*, she said to Kamala, "You are looking very pretty, Kamala. Where is my **brother**? It gives me great happiness that he **never** broke his **promise** to me. I know you must have **been** very **busy and** forgot to invite me. It doesn't **matter**. I am **no guest**. I do not **have** to wail for an invitation to **come** to my own brother's house."

Uma chatted cheerfully, completely unaware of the sudden silence in the room. Kamala's rich friends sniggered. Kamala felt humiliated and Gopal was ashamed.

This went on for seven years. Each year, Kamala performed *Lakshmi Puja* on a lavish scale. Hundreds of guests attended and feasted sumptuously. Uma was never invited but she always came. She would arrive in her patched-up



clothes, take the *prasad* on a banana leaf, talk cheerfully to Gopal and Kamala, and depart only after she had blessed them. This annual event was embarrassing for both Kamala and Gopal.

All these years, Uma's husband worked hard to support

his family. **Uma** was quite content with the little they had. Then her husband's business began to prosper. Money began to trickle in steadily and they soon became very wealthy. Now **Uma** lived in a large house, dressed in the finest silks, had many servants and rode about in a fine carriage driven by four gleaming white horses.

Gopal and Kamala heard of **Uma**'s newly acquired riches. When the month of *Shravana* drew near, Kamala said to her husband, "Go to **Uma**'s house and invite her and her family to the *puja*. And do not go empty-handed. Take her some sweets and coconuts. After all, she is your elder sister."

So **Gopal** went to **Uma**'s house and extended a personal invitation. **Uma** welcomed her brother affectionately and promised to attend the function.

The big day dawned. Guests began to troop in. *Mantras* were chanted, hymns sung, and the fragrance of flowers and camphor pervaded the house. Suddenly there was a clatter of horses. A handsome carriage drove up to the gate. Everyone stopped talking and stared. A servant descended from the coach-box and opened the door of the carriage. A lady dressed in a bright golden Banarasi sari, diamonds glittering on her neck and ears, stepped out and walked gracefully towards the house.

Kamala hardly recognised her sister-in-law. How beautiful she looked! Kamala greeted **Uma** affectionately and respectfully stood aside to let her enter. Gopal conducted her to a comfortable cushioned seat and Kamala rushed up with a variety of sweets in a silver plate. **Uma**

smiled gently. Turning to Gopal she asked for another cushioned seat.

Gopal rushed up with a cushioned chair. Uma took off her gold-embroidered shawl and put it on the chair next to her. "Uma must be feeling hot," Gopal thought anxiously. He beckoned to Karnala and whispered, "Go and bring a fan."

Kamala ran and brought a fan. She stood beside Uma and fanned her gently.

Then Uma took off her ornaments one after another



and put them on the chair. **Gopal** asked her, "Uma dear, do you **find** your jewellery too heavy?"

Uma did not **reply**. When she had taken off all her **jewellery**, she picked up the sweets one by **one** and put them on each **plate** of **jewellery**. People **stared** in **amazement**.

Gopal asked agitatedly, "What are you doing?"

Uma smiled. "I am giving the **sweets** to the **real** guests to whom they have **been** offered. This sumptuous **feast** was not **laid** for my **benefit**. You **offered** it to my fine clothes and gold ornaments. I am content with some **prasad** on a banana leaf. All these years it was all that was offered to me and my children."

There was pin-drop silence in the room. Then the guests **began** to whisper among themselves and throw glances at **Gopal** and **Kamala**. They both wished that the earth would **open** and swallow them up.

Then **Uma** rebuked them gently, "**Affection and** love do not change with wealth. I can bless you equally whether I am in **rags** or in **fine** silks. Your house will always prosper and **happiness will abound** in it."

THE SOFTEST BED IN THE WORLD

Long, long ago, there was a queen, Minakshi, who always complained bitterly that she was unable to have a sound night's sleep. Throughout the night she tossed and turned restlessly. She was always disgruntled and bad-tempered. Her beautiful face was marred by discontent and she repeatedly grumbled, "My bed is not soft enough. I can never sleep."

The King sent his servants to distant lands. They returned from far away with cotton wool of the finest quality. Then the King's Chief Tailor used the finest silk and sewed a beautiful mattress for the Queen. But Minakshi was not satisfied. "This is too hard," she grumbled. If you don't find me anything softer than this, I shall fall sick and die. No mortal can live without sleep."

The King was very upset. He paced up and down the garden unhappily. He was in the depths of despair. Then his Prime Minister approached him and bowing respectfully, said, "Your Majesty, I have just had a brilliant idea. I think I can find a bed soft enough to satisfy our beloved Queen."



The King was overjoyed and asked the Prime Minister to explain.

"Your Majesty," the Prime Minister continued, "in the royal park there are hundreds of varieties of flowers. There are *jayi*, *jui*, *chameli*, and *bela* which are whiter than milk and softer than snow. We can ask the gardeners to gather the buds just as they are about to open every evening. Then we can select the finest among them and spread them on the Queen's bed. The bed will be very soft and, as the sun rises, the buds will open and fill the room with their fragrance. I am sure the Queen will be pleased."

The King agreed. The next day, the Chief Gardener was informed of the King's orders. In **the** evening, as the sun was setting, he picked the finest buds, and the Queen's maids spread them thickly on the royal bed. That night the Queen had a long and peaceful sleep. The King was very pleased and rewarded his Prime Minister for his bright idea.

So day after day, as the sun was **setting**, the most beautiful buds **were collected** and spread **on** the Queen's bed. The Queen's face **lost** its bad-tempered look and she began to smile **again**. The King was very happy and thought **that at** long last this vexing problem **had been solved forever**.

But a few days later, in the early hours of the morning, there was a scream from the Queen's chamber. The maids awoke and rushed to her bedside. Minakshi, the Queen, was sitting up in bed, rubbing her back and shaking with rage.



The King ran up and enquired anxiously **what was** wrong. The maids stood there trembling with fear.

"**Who** made my bed last night?" asked **Minakshi** angrily.

The **maids** looked at one another and then one timidly replied, "We all did, Your Majesty."

"Is that **so**? I **am** glad you have **owned** up. You neglected your duty. There was something hard in my bed. My **back is** black and Mue with bruises. I did **not** sleep a **wink** last night," said **Minakshi** scowling.

The maids assured her that they had taken all possible care in making the bed. But the Queen remained unconvinced. The King then suggested that they examine the bed carefully and find out the cause of the trouble.

A thorough search was made. Every flower was examined. At last, hidden amongst the mass of fragrant flowers, was one bud which had not opened in the early hours of the morning. It was still tightly closed **and quite hard.**

The King **was** furious. **He blamed the maids for not** selecting the buds carefully. In **his anger**, he **dismissed all** of them. He also discharged the Chief Gardener.

The Queen remained unappeased. She kept crying bitterly. "**I won't** stay a moment longer in this place," she said. "**I will go to my brother immediately.**"

The King, the Prime Minister and the courtiers tried to change the Queen's mind. They all tried hard to persuade





her to stay. But she refused to listen to any of them. So the King had to make arrangements for her departure. Minakshi's brother who was the King of a distant land lived far away across the sea, and the voyage **was** long and dangerous. The King had a luxurious ship built specially **for the** Queen and gave her a dozen servants from the palace to cater to her needs. He **asked** the ship's **crew** to be very careful and promised them **bags** of **gold** if **they** carried Minakshi safely to her destination.

The voyage **began** well. A **gentle sea-breeze** soothed the Queen's anger and **raised her** spirits. **She began** to **smile once more**. But the very **next day**, the **sea** turned **rough**. In a few **moments** the ship **began** to **sink**. **Everybody** **jumped** **into** **the sea**. **Minakshi** was saved by a **miracle**.

She clung desperately to a **plank** and was carried by **the** waves for many hours. Eventually she was **tossed** on to the shore of a strange **country**. She was completely **exhausted**. But seeing a small hut, she dragged **herself** towards it. An **old** man and his wife lived **here**.

Minakshi told them of her misfortunes. **But** she did



not tell them that *she* was a queen. She begged them for food **and shelter**.

They agreed. "You can **stay with us as long as you** wish. But we are both old and we need the help of a young person like you."

The couple were too aged to work for a living. So Minakshi offered to earn enough to support them. Nearby a dam was being constructed across a river. Hundreds of labourers were working there. Minakshi decided to offer her services and earn some money. But would she be able to cope with this hard manual labour? She had found even a flower-bud too hard for her to sleep on. Minakshi wept but she **had** no **alternative**. She obtained **work at the dam** and **started** working with the other labourers. Like everyone **else** she got her daily **wages**. She spent the money on feeding and clothing the old couple and herself. She could only **afford** to eat the **simplest** food and wear the coarsest clothes. But **she did not grumble or complain**. She slept on a **straw mat which was spread on the floor**. **She was so** tired after a day's hard labour, that she fell soundly asleep the moment her head touched the pillow.

One day the King of that country came to visit the dam. He wanted to see for himself how the work was progressing. That evening, when it was pay-time, the King decided to pay the labourers himself. When Minakshi's turn came, she stepped forward. The King looked at her. He looked again. He stared at **her in amazement**. Although her clothes were patched and torn, the King recognised his sister.

He leapt forward and hugged Minakshi. Tears of joy flowed down their cheeks. Everyone had thought Minakshi had been drowned many years ago. There was great rejoicing. Then the King turned anxiously towards Minakshi and said "Great misfortune must have befallen you. Look at your worn-out clothes and look how thin you have become. My heart bleeds to see you in this condition. You must have suffered greatly to be reduced to this state."

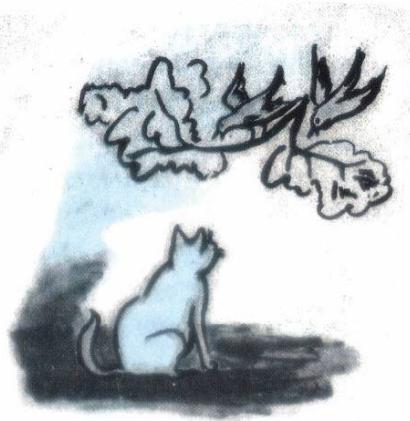
The Queen smiled and replied, "I have not suffered, I have prospered. When I was a queen I lived a life of luxury but I was never contented. I found it difficult to sleep even on the softest bed. My husband spared no effort to make me comfortable and happy, but nothing pleased me. Now I know the hard life most people live. Fate has forced me to live like them. I have worked hard and slept soundly on a straw mat. I no longer complain that I haven't a bed which is soft enough."

Minakshi's brother immediately sent his brother-in-law a message to inform him that Minakshi was safe. The King was overjoyed at the news and hastened to his wife's side. He arrived loaded with valuable gifts and delicacies that he hoped would bring forth a smile from Minakshi. To his surprise Minakshi looked more beautiful than ever before. She smiled often and there was peace and contentment on her face. The angry frown that he dreaded but was accustomed to see every morning had completely vanished.

"You seem to be sleeping well. So your brother has been able to find a bed soft enough to please you? Where

did he find this miraculous bed? **What is it made of?"** the King asked.

Minakshi **replied**, "I have been sleeping on a straw mat laid on **the floor.**"



THE MAN WITH A DEAD RAT

Many, many years ago, there lived in the city of Varanasi a learned *pandit* named Chullaka. One day, as he was walking along lost in meditation, he saw a rat lying across a street.

"What an unpleasant sight!" he muttered. "But even a dead rat could be a source of pleasure. I am sure that a wise man could put it to proper use and become wealthy."

A poor young man, Hari, was passing by and chanced to overhear these words. He thought, "This man is a great philosopher. There must be great wisdom in what he said." So he went and picked up the dead rat.

Hari was wondering what he could do with the rat when an idea flashed across his mind. "There is nothing that a cat loves more than feasting on a rat," he reasoned to himself. "My neighbour's cat has been famished because there are no rats in the house. This will be a real treat for the animal."

Hari went straight to his neighbour and held out the dead rat. The neighbour was delighted.

"Where did you find a dead rat?" he asked with

So Mohan paid no heed to the thugs. Soon his caravan entered the sandy desert. But they had ample food and water and so could finish their journey in comfort.

On reaching the town, they had enough time to assess the market rates. Mohan sold his goods at considerable profit and returned home a happy and contented man.



as they came out and received many, many bunches of flowers in exchange. He sold the flowers and bought a large stock of sweets which he sold not only to the gardeners but also to all those who visited the garden. This became a regular business and Hari acquired a great deal of money.

One night there was a violent storm. Thunder rumbled and lightning flashed across the sky. Trees swayed and trembled. Branches broke with loud cracking sounds, leaves fell by the hundred, and flowers were bruised and scattered.

The next morning the lawns were littered with fallen leaves, broken branches and bruised flower petals. The gardeners were in despair. How could they possibly clear it all before the King arrived to inspect the garden? But if he saw the garden in its present condition, they would all be dismissed on the spot. "What can we do?" they asked one another in despair.

Then Hari came forward. "I will undertake to dear the garden if you pay me well." The gardeners agreed without a moment's hesitation.

Hari was very popular with children. He gathered a large number of boys and girls together and said, "I want you to sweep this garden in half an hour. It must be completely neat and tidy. Remember it is the King's inspection day."

Immediately a hundred boys and girls set to work. They rushed around making little heaps of leaves, twigs and flowers. What fun it was! In half an hour they had swept all the litter and were about to make a large heap



outside **the garden**. Then Hari said, "We might as well carry all this stuff a **little further away**."

A **stone's throw** from the garden was the **potter's hut**. Hari and the children carried the litter there **and piled** it all up. Then Hari turned to the potter and said, "I **have** brought enough fuel to **last you** at least a month." The potter was so pleased that he gave Hari four gold coins.

Seeing the garden immaculate and clean in such a short time, the gardeners gave Hari a dozen gold coins. Hari was overjoyed. He had been paid twice **over and** for very little work. He put away fifteen gold coins and with the sixteenth he bought **sweets** and **distributed** them **among the children** who **had** helped him. They were jubilant and went away **dancing** and skipping with joy.

Hari then went **and** bought more than two dozen earthen **jars**. Then he built a shed by the roadside. He filled the **jars** with **ice-cold** water and put up a board **with the words: DRINKING WATER.**

Five hundred men, carrying bundles of grass on their heads were walking along the road. They were very **tired**, and sweat was pouring down their faces. They stopped at Hari's shed and drank the cool water.

"We cannot thank you enough for your refreshing water," they said after they had quenched their thirst. "How can we repay you? We have no money. Although we have so much hay, we have no customer in sight."

"I do not want any money," Hari replied. "But I would be grateful if each one of you gave me one sheaf from your bundle." Hari continued, "I have good news for you. A

horse-trader is to visit our city soon. He will buy **all** your grass. You must only promise not to **sell your** sheaves **until** I have **sold mine.**"

As soon as they left for the bazar, the horse-trader arrived with **five hundred horses.** The district through which he had travelled was dry and barren, and he had been unable to obtain any grass for his horses. He immediately bought the **five hundred sheaves from Hari for 500** silver coins.

Hari **continued** giving water to the thirsty people who passed by. He got money or **goods** in exchange and **steadily** accumulated more and more wealth.

One day, he heard that a man was coming across the river with a flotilla of boats loaded with merchandise. He hurriedly **collected** all the money he had accumulated and bought a chariot. He decorated it with flowers and rode to the harbour singing gaily.

As soon as the first boat landed, Hari went up to the captain and gave him a gold ring.

"This is **more** valuable than six months' **wages.** If you promise to **help** me obtain all the merchandise in the boats, I shall pay you still **more,**" said **Hari.** The captain agreed.

When the merchant unloaded his goods, he was very pleased to find that a customer was ready to buy all his merchandise on the spot. He was saved the trouble of going to the market and haggling over prices.

As he was settling terms with Hari, other agents arrived. They were upset when they found that Hari had stolen a march on them and had bought all the wares. They pooled

their resources and paid Hari double the amount to purchase all the goods for themselves. From this amount Hari paid the merchant half and settled his dues. He also paid fifty gold coins to the captain, who had made this bargain possible. And Hari still made a wry handsome profit from his **dealings**.

Then Hari went to Chullaka the philosopher. Kneeling down, he **placed** a bag full of gold coins at his **feet**.

"What is this?" demanded Chullaka.



"This is payment for the advice you rendered four months ago," replied Hari and related the whole story.

Chullaka was very **pleased** but refused to accept the bag of **gold**. "The remark I made was heard by everyone on the street. Yet you alone used it profitably. Your money is the fruit of your own intelligence. You **deserve** every **penny** you have accumulated."



THE CHAIR OF JUDGEMENT

On the **outskirts** of the **old** and historic city of Ujjain was a flat expanse dotted with **hillocks**. One day, when a group of children were playing in the **fields**, a boy ran up a hillock. **Suddenly** he **tripped** and fell. He looked around and found that his foot had hit a smooth slab of stone. He called his friends and showed them **the** stone seat he had discovered. Then sitting **on** the stone, he said, "I'm **the** King. You are my **courtiers**. **You** may come with your **complaints** and I will judge your cases."

The other boys liked the idea. They came up one by one and **stated** **their** **imaginary** **complaints**. Witnesses were called to **give** evidence. Then **the** **make-believe** King weighed the facts laid before him and **passed** **judgment**.

The **children** **enjoyed** this game **very** **much**. It became a great **favourite**. Every day, they enacted the court **scene**. Complaints were heard, offenders brought forward, the evidence carefully weighed and then the **same** boy, sitting on the **stone** **slab**, **passed** **judgment**.

Soon **word** spread round town of the **just** and discerning judgment of **the** boy. "He **must** have divine



powers," the people whispered among themselves.

The next day, there was a serious dispute between two farmers over the ownership of a piece of land. Instead of going to the King, they went to the hillock where the children were playing and placed their case before the boy. The boy heard the evidence in silence and then pronounced judgment. Everyone was stupefied at his wisdom and impartiality.

From that day the people of the town came to the boy-judge with their disputes & consulted him rather than the King. And every time, they departed pleased and satisfied with his verdict.

Soon this story reached the King's ears. He was amazed but also very angry. "Who is this urchin who presumes to judge cases better than I?" he demanded. "I do not believe these tales. I will go and see for myself."

So saying; the King set off for the hillock with his guards and courtiers. The King watched the children's game for some time and even he was impressed and astonished.

"I must admit," he said turning to his ministers, "that boy has great wisdom. I never expected such discernment from someone so young. He would put many learned and wise men to shame."

"But this is not the boy who usually gives judgment. He was unwell today and another boy replaced him on the stone slab."

"This is extraordinary!" exclaimed the King. "But let me see this stone slab carefully. Maybe it has magical powers."

So the stone slab was dug up. It turned out to be a beautifully carved stone throne. On its four legs were carved four angels. A learned pandit asserted that it was hundreds of years old and was the famous throne of King Vikramaditya who had been renowned for the wisdom and impartiality of his judgment.

The King ordered that it should be carried to the palace and installed in the court. "Whenever I have to settle a dispute, I will sit on it and pass judgment," the King decided.

The next day, the King arrived when the court was full. He went straight towards the stone throne. He was just about to sit down when a loud voice commanded, "Stop!"

The King halted and looked around. He could see no one. He looked again carefully. The voice came from the carved angel on one of the throne's legs.

The angel spoke, "Are you really worthy to occupy this throne? Are you sure you have never stolen anything?"

The King hung his head in shame. "Recently I appropriated some land which belonged to one of my courtiers who fell out of favour," he admitted.

"Then you are unworthy," replied the angel. "You must do penance for three days." So saying the angel spread its wings and flew away.

The King fasted and prayed for three days. On the fourth day he again approached the throne. Just as he was about to sit down, the second stone-angel spoke, "Stop. Are certain that you have never lied?"

The King hesitated. He could recall many occasions when he had lied his way out of a sticky situation. So the

King had again to step back **and the** second stone-angel spread its wings and **flew** away.

The King **again prayed** and fasted for **three** days. This time **he approached the throne** hesitantly. Just as he **was** about to sit on it, the third angel asked him **whether** he was **sure** that he had never hurt or **injured** anyone.

The King quietly **stepped back** and the third stone-angel **spread its wings and flew away**.

After **fasting** and praying for another **three** days, the King **went** to his **court again**. His **steps** faltered as he approached **the throne**.

Then the fourth **and last** angel spoke, "The boys who sat and played on this throne were innocent and untouched by evil. If you are **convinced** that you are the most worthy judge in the land, you may now occupy this throne."

The King hesitated for a long time. But then he thought to himself, "If a child can sit on that throne, so can I. I am a **king and no one can claim** to be richer, wiser, **greater** or **more impartial than I**. I **will definitely** sit on this throne."

So saying the King resolutely stepped **forward** to occupy the throne. But just then the fourth angel spread its **wings** and **flew away** with the throne.

THE CLEVER WIFE

Many years ago, in the ancient city of **Delhi**, there lived a young doctor, Chhotulal, and his beautiful **wife**, **Nandini**. Chhotulal was notoriously absent-minded and however hard he tried, the poor man always prescribed the **wrong** remedy or mixed up his patients' medicines. This went on for many **years** with Chhotulal giving the man with snake-bite a cough syrup or the woman with a sprained ankle the **cure** for a headache.

Then one day, a young farmer who was **suffering** from a mild sun-stroke arrived to consult him at the **same** time as an old woman **whose arm** had been crushed by a **falling tree**. **Chhotulal**, in his usual absent-minded way, amputated the **farmer's arm** and gave the old **woman** a **couple of tablets** that he had specially **prepared as** a cure for sun-stroke. Soon **people stopped** coming to consult Chhotulal or **buy his medicines**. He became poorer and poorer and could no **longer afford** to **give Nandini** gold necklaces and **beautiful saris**. Nandini grew ill-tempered and **discontented** and kept nagging him.

One evening, Chhotulal returned **home** without a single

paisa. He had left **home** early and waited **all** day. But in **vain**. No one **had** entered his clinic.

Nandini raved and ranted at him. "What have I done to deserve such a husband?" she screamed. "A **man** is expected to provide food and shelter for his wife. Last night we finished the last of the dry *chapattis* and *dal*. There is **not a morsel to eat in the** house. Since we **have** been reduced to beggary, go and beg now." Then she burst into tears and slammed the door.

Chhotulal hung **his head in shame**. He **shuffled his feet** and, looking at the **floor**, said diffidently, "Nandini, please smile. I will **go and beg** if it pleases you. Just **tell me where to go**."

Nandini dried her tears and gave a glimmer of a **smile**. "Go to the King. You **can** ask him for anything and if **he** is in a good mood, he may grant your request!"

So Chhotulal set off for the palace. On arrival **he** boldly marched past the **fierce-looking** guards with **their** gleaming swords and gold-embroidered **uniforms standing straight as eucalyptus trees**. The King **was seated** on his **bejewelled throne** and on **either** side were his **ministers and courtiers**.

Chhotulal bowed three times respectfully before the King. Then, taking courage in both hands, he spoke, "Your Majesty, please grant me anything."

The King smiled with amusement. "What exactly do you want?" he asked.

Chhotulal was dumbfounded. His wife had not told him what to beg for. She had only said, "Ask for anything."

So he repeated, "Anything, Your Majesty."

The King turned to his ~~minister~~. "Give this man ~~the~~ plot of land that nobody ~~else~~ wants," he commanded.

Chhotulal sang all the way home. Rushing to his wife, he cried, "See how kind the King is. He has granted my request. He ~~has~~ given me ~~the~~ land that nobody else wanted."

~~Nandini~~ tore ~~her~~ hair in despair. But what could she do? After ~~her~~ temper had cooled, she called Chhotulal and they set off together to see the land. It was a large plot overgrown with weeds and ~~bushes~~ with enormous stows scattered ~~around~~.

~~Nandini~~'s heart sank. How would ~~they~~ ever dear the land, make it fit to plough and then sow seeds? But ~~Nandini~~ was never at a loss for long. Turning to her husband, she told him unquestioningly to imitate her actions. Then bending down, she peered carefully at the land and began to examine it. Chhotulal followed suit. They both walked slowly, backs bent, ~~eyes~~ glued to the ground, up and down ~~the~~ land.

A gang of thieves came galloping past. Seeing Chhotulal and his ~~wife's intent~~ search, the robber-chief dismounted and asked Nandini, "What are you looking for? Have you lost anything?"

Nandini looked startled. "Oh no, no. I have lost nothing. Nothing at all," she said quickly and tried to lead the robber-chief away from the land.

This made him very suspicious. He resolved to find out what Nandini was looking for. He kept questioning her and at last Nandini took him aside and whispered, "I will



tell you a secret but you must promise not to repeat it. My grandfather died yesterday. Just before his death he told me that he had buried three chests full of gold coins in **this** field. We are trying to **find** the chests. But **please, please**, don't tell anyone."

The robber-chief swore not to tell **anyone** and departed. Soon afterwards Chhotulal and **his** wife went home. Nandini smiled, sang and danced all the way back. Chhotulal was surprised to see her suddenly so happy.

The next day, Chhotulal and Nandini returned to their plot. The land was hardly recognizable. The field had been well dug, weeds and bushes weeded out and the stones cleared away. **Nandini** clapped **her** hands with glee. "My story of **three** chests full of gold must have **fooled** those men. Trying to find the gold, they have done all our hard work for us. Now all we have to do is buy wheat and maize **seeds** and plant them."

So Nandini went to the *baniya* and borrowed money to buy **seeds**. She and **Chhotulal** planted them, **manured** and **watered** the land and a few months later **reaped** a plentiful harvest. They were now **wealthy** with plenty to eat, a **large** comfortable **house** to live in and enough gold necklaces and beautiful saris to **keep** Nandini **always smiling**. But the robber-chief was still angry at the way he had been tricked and was just waiting for an opportunity to take his revenge.

One night when Nandini and Chhotulal were about to go to bed, the robber-chief stealthily entered the house and hid behind the curtain. His shadow fell on the opposite wall and Nandini recognised him. She filled a pot with pieces of



broken glass and rusty nails and on top put a layer of *bury*? Then she instructed her husband in a whisper to call her in five minutes and ask in a loud voice where she had put all their savings.

A few **minutes** later, **Chhotulal** came to **the** bedroom and asked loudly, "Where have you put all our savings? I hope you have kept **them** away safely?"

"You don't have to worry," Nandini replied. "You know I am clever and prudent. Our savings are quite safe. I have hidden **them** in a pot and covered them with a layer of *burfi*. No one will ever find my secret hiding-place." Then Nandini blew out the oil lamp and went to sleep.

The robber-chief smiled to himself from behind the curtain. At last he **would** get his own back on Nandini! He waited twenty minutes till **Chhotulal** was snoring soundly and Nandini breathing evenly and deeply. Then convinced that they were both asleep, he crept into the dinning-room and, seeing the pot of *burfi*, **picked** it up quickly and silently left the **house**.

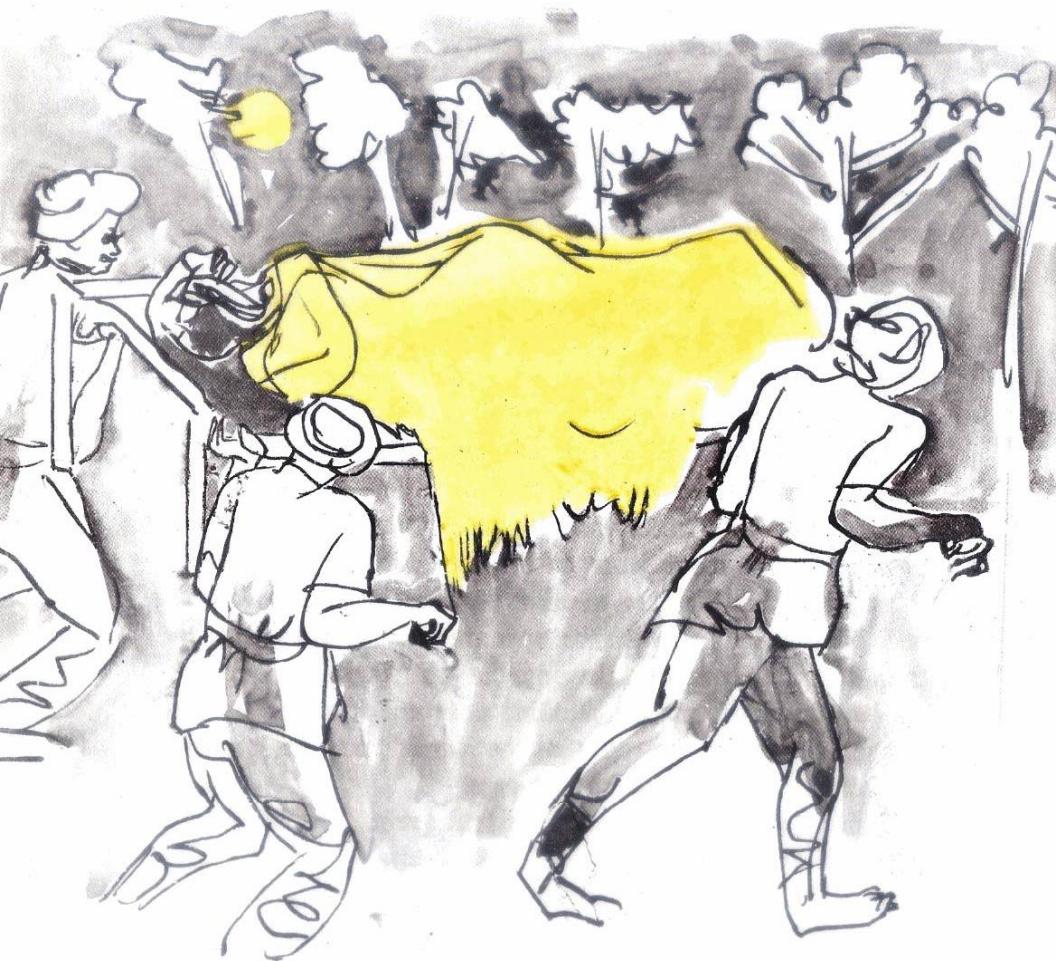
He ran to his companions and holding out the pot told them it **contained** all of **Chhotulal** and Nandini's savings **under** the layer of *burfi*. The thieves immediately pounced on **the** pot. They **threw away all the burfi** in their impatience to get at the **money and jewels** at the bottom. But **all** that **their hands closed** ~~on~~ broken **pieces** of **glass** which cut their hands **and rusty nails** that **pierced** their fingers. Hands bleeding and **were deprived of** the *burfi* which they had **flung** on the ground and ~~which~~ was now muddy and **inedible**, the robbers **vowed revenge once again**.

A week later, as dusk **was falling**, Nandini heard a noise outside. She recognised the voice of the **robber-chief** and, tiptoeing **nearer**, listened intently. She overheard **their plan to climb in one by one** through **her** bedroom **window** and steal all the valuables in the house after tying and gagging both Chhotulal and her. “**I will use** a specially strong rope to tie Nandini, so that she does not forget us in a hurry,” the **robber-chief** boasted.

Nandini **rushed to the kitchen and picked up a sharp knife**. Then she went **and stood behind the window**. Soon she heard a rustling **among the leaves** of the ivy **plant** that grew on the walls of the **cottage**. A face peered in through the window. Swift as a striking snake, Nandini cut off the protruding nose. The head **was** immediately withdrawn. The robber jumped down and showed his bleeding nose to the chief. The **robber-chief** insisted that he must have bumped into a sharp stone in **the dark**. To prove his point, the **robber-chief** decided to **climb** through the window himself. **No sooner had his face appeared in the open window than Nandini struck again and cut off his nose**. Then the **robber-chief**, holding **his bleeding nose and jumping up and down with pain, vowed that he would not eat another morsel till he had had his revenge**.

Spring was over and summer had set in. The days were hot and **dry but in the evenings there was** a fresh, cool **breeze**. Chhotulal and Nandini began to sleep in **the garden under the gentle light of the moon with the twinkling stars as companions**.

Two nights later, Nandini dreamt that she was riding



a **camel**. Chhotulal was on a camel ahead of her and there were palm-trees and beautiful gardens in the distance. Galloping towards her swiftly on a gleaming white horse was a handsome prince. He held out an exquisite white-and-gold sari and a large golden crown with sparkling rubies. Nandini was stretching out her hand to receive these gifts when she was rudely jerked awake.

She looked down and saw to her dismay that she wasn't riding a **camel** at all. In fact, her bed was being carried by **four** thieves and the others were marching ahead.

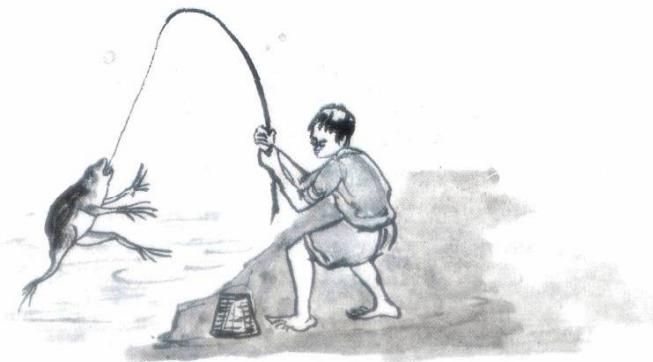
"Oh heavens!" thought Nandini. "This time I **am** really caught. I wonder where they are planning to take me and what they will do to me. I cannot expect much mercy from them."

Just then one of the thieves said, "This woman is very heavy and my shoulders are aching. Let us take a short rest and sleep a little and then we **can** continue on our way." Everyone agreed and coming across a banyan tree, they put the bed down. Leaning against the large tree-trunk, they all dozed off. Then Nandini, bundling up her bedsheet to look like a **sleeping** person, stealthily got off her bed and climbed up the banyan tree.

Fortunately the **banyan tree has large leaves** and its **branches** grow downwards to **form** a perfect shelter. Nandini sat comfortably **on a branch and gazed down at** the robbers. **Soon** a brilliant way to **escape** struck her. She covered her face with her black shawl and hid her hands under her white night dress. Then she started flapping her arms, shrieking and making **strange** noises.

The robbers awoke and looked around in **terror**. A ghostly **scream** rent the silent **night** air. The robbers looked up. Staring down at them from the tree was a **strange black-faced** monster with **white** flapping arms. "This is surely the *bhoot* that inhabits this tree. He must be **angry** because **we** have disturbed him," they murmured. And scrambling up, they ran without a backward glance as fast as **their** feet could carry them.

Nandini could barely control her laughter. She picked up her belongings and, smiling happily, set off for **her** home, knowing that she had seen the last of **the** **thieves**.





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